

## SEMINAR ON SPIRITUALITY

### REVISITING AN EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH TO SALVATION

The 1982 seminar discussed the soteriological explorations of Sebastian Moore as developed in *The Crucified Jesus is No Stranger* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1977) and *The Fire and the Rose Are One* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1980). Moore facilitated the discussion by providing his current perspective on significant soteriological issues. A summary follows.

Salvation presupposes a need for salvation, presupposes a condition which stands in need of healing. Theology's most generic need today is to draw on psychological and anthropological insights to illuminate this universal condition, which tradition calls original sin. Such original sin looks back to an original event. Moore suggests that that event is not a sinful choice on the part of our first parents but rather the traumatic event of the animals of one species in an evolving universe becoming self-aware and hence aware of their separateness.

Original sin does not seem too pessimistic a term for this event when it is considered in relation to its past, when we were not self-aware. Our total participation in the cosmic system was broken by that event. We left union with the cosmic world and were jolted into the loneliness of an "I" exposed to it. The primordial sense of the whole has been displaced by self-awareness and the consequent task of making choices among particulars. The generic sinfulness of this condition consists in the ability of our particular choices to actualize the union with the whole that we still crave for. When we awoke into an awful loneliness, ultimate reality with which we had been unconsciously united became dream and memory. It is this dream-character of the really real that is the condition of original or generic sin. The doctrine of original sin states the infinity of the reality in whose presence the now spiritual being lives, and it refuses to judge that being by a closer-to-it standard than the infinite. We are stumbling after union with a dreamed and unknown God: that is our greatness and our wretchedness. We did not awaken to evil choice or because of evil choice; we awakened to disconnectedness.

Self-awareness is the awakening of desire. We desire to be one now, in consciousness, as once we were one in the preconscious condition. But unconscious unity is closed and contemporary spiritual movements that seek the dissolution of the ego are unfaithful to our experience. But if we cannot return then we must focus our attention to what lies at the end: death, both as symbol and reality. Death is the dissolution of our present mode of self-awareness and suggests, by its similarity to our original preconscious simplicity, that it is the gateway to the final state of union.

But surely death can be acknowledged as the gateway to a conscious union only by those who have tasted death and the conscious union which it brings. That was the condition, Moore suggests, of the disciples of Jesus, the paradigm of Christian experience. Jesus, the new man free from the sinfulness of separation, the man for whom God was no dream, awakened in the disciples their original desire for conscious union with God. And they experienced this

dangerous new awakening as focused in and radically dependent on Jesus. With his death their desire was also thrown into the darkness of death. Original desire, all that makes life significant, had been brought to consciousness by Jesus and then brought to death by his death. The reality of the resurrection is that these dead men were brought to life again by the risen Jesus; original desire had been awakened in the disciples on both sides of death, and eternal life began for them. The presence of the risen Jesus to the disciples was not the presence of the living to the living. Nor was it the presence, sometimes vivid, of the dead to the living. It was the presence of the living to the dead, inviting them to eternal life. The encounter with Jesus after his death persuaded the human spirit, in the person of the disciples, that heaven was and had arrived, had come out of the closet of the dream. The criterion of the realism of our resurrection doctrine lies precisely in saying: it was real enough to conquer the profound fears and anxieties of the disciples and reawaken their desire; surely there is nothing more real than this. But the significance of the resurrection begins rather than ends with the disciples. These dead men, now alive by the presence of the risen Jesus, are sent as the Son was sent to bring life into a world made new to their eyes. Theirs is an existential task: to bring to their brothers and sisters a spiritual enablement to anticipate death and to taste that state of union that is beyond our reach as people in between the dream and ultimate fulfillment.

#### *Discussion*

Questions were raised about identifying self-awareness with sin. If taken in its strongest form, such identification would make the human condition basically sinful and call into question the goodness of God. Moore distinguished between the trauma of the emergence of self-awareness and how we respond in that state. We tend either to deny our finitude or to deny our memory and desire for the infinite. Those denials are perhaps what is more traditionally called sin. The death and resurrection of Jesus surely resolves that sin but at a profounder level it awakens deep desire and inaugurates the hoped for state of conscious unity with God. Guilt should be seen as secondary to the desire for unity.

The matter of the evidence for Moore's analysis of the original event was focused on. Phenomenologically, the individual's coming into self-awareness after symbiosis with mother is the personal analogue for that event. The Oedipal crisis, it was suggested, is the locus for the negotiation of finitude. The point was raised that there are significant variations in male and female negotiation of this period particularly with regard to sameness and difference of the child's sex in relation to the mother. In later discussion, the differences in negotiation were recognized but the basic challenge of not only acknowledging but also accepting finitude was seen as common to both men and women. The trauma of the evolution of the human race in coming to self-awareness is repeated in each of us.

Resolution of the Oedipal crisis, then, seems integral not only to psychological but to spiritual health and therapeutic renegotiation seems called for when it has been inadequately resolved. The question was raised about the relationship of psychological healing to the experience of the Dark Night. Specific differences were not explored.

In the second discussion, guilt as a misperception of the human condition was the focus. Not that real guilt does not exist but that it is often less frightening to say one is guilty than to acknowledge one is finite and not really in control of the situation. The scrupulous person and the child who blames himself or herself for the death of the parent would be examples of this; but the tendency to flee to guilt rather than to acknowledge limitation and even impotence would seem to be widespread.

Throughout the discussions spirituality was used as a source for the reinterpretation of doctrine, in this instance, of sin and salvation. It was decided to make spirituality as source for theology the topic of next year's seminar. The general convention theme next year will be continuities and discontinuities in theology after Vatican II; the theological use of spirituality is an obvious and significant change in recent Roman Catholic tradition.

VERNON GREGSON

*Loyola University  
New Orleans*